

# Olives Reborn in the Salento

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*Xylella fastidiosa* is the bacterium that in the past decade or so has killed around 11 million olive trees in the Salento, the heel of the boot of Italy.

People — including me — thought it might be the death of olive oil production in the Salento and the rest of Puglia. In the past couple of years, however, literal green shoots of resistant olive varieties have taken hold, and with them the opportunity for a new industry focused on high-quality, profitable olive oil. To learn more, I went to visit Silvestro Silvestori, who runs The Awaiting Table cookery school in Lecce.

**Silvestro:** I think it really helps to go back to the beginning. So the Salento was the OPEC of Europe. This was, the vast majority of trees that exist here were for making lantern oil for northern Europe. So what really, it wasn't that these were extra virgin trees that were dying. These were trees that were retrofitted to make extra virgin olive oil after the invention of the light bulb. And so the lot of them were self-seeded or essentially weeds. There's not a ... they were not planted on grids. They're all different sized trees, younger trees next to older trees, places where tractors can't go. So it's always been really an industry pointed towards letting olives fall. Black oil, whatever you want to call that. Let olives fall, gathering them, a calorie is a calorie if you're going to make lantern oil, right? So you don't really care. There is no grades. There is no quality. Right?

So that's the beginning of the Salento. So if you had to knock out one part of Puglia, if you had to sacrifice one part, this would be the best part to have sacrificed, just because the quality of the oil, generally speaking, is nothing like it is in central or even northern Puglia.

That locally is considered blasphemy to say, but it's true. It makes people, local people, very angry if you say that, you know, because it's such a folkloristically rich part of ... My grandfather ... Taste this oil. My

grandfather made this oil. This is the best oil in the world. And 100% of the time, they're confusing the virtue of the person who made the oil with the virtue of the oil. So you essentially have an olive oil culture that doesn't go forward because it doesn't know what it doesn't know.

So again, this, this culture, the two cultures of olive oil in the Salento — and I mean the Salento, not Puglia, the Salento — you have this cottage industry grandfathered with 40 trees out back, making oil very often from fallen olives even so, or pressing it still using jute mats, *fiscoli*. And really, the industry left that 50 or 100 years ago and really moved on to very unromantic, very unsexy, professional olive mills. I mean, we're in the golden age of olive oil. The vast majority of people in the Salento don't know that.

**Jeremy:** So there wasn't a golden olive age, er, a golden age for olive oil. It was always not that great.

**Silvestro:** Yeah, there's no question about it. If you have oil that's made with *fiscoli*, with the jute mat, not only do you have rancidity in it, but you have the oil from the person before you, assuming that you're using a shared mill, and everyone is. Very often has some water in it that starts to ferment and you have all of the wet dog, wet cardboard, all of the classic diseases of — I'm sorry, the defects — of making low quality olive oil. The level of technology gone way beyond what the average person can do.

When I think about what the Greeks were eating, what the Romans were eating, what people were eating 500 years ago, I can't even imagine that there was so much poetry written about it. It must have just been on the brink of of rancidity. Right? If you look at olive oil now, the polyphenols, the antioxidants in it, the rates ... Most olive oils that are well made, any kind of oil that would win an award, it's high enough in polyphenols that you could you could sell it as a pharmaceutical, as an antioxidant. That's 15 years old. 20 years old. The amount of olive oil that's well made all over the world that's very high quality is extraordinary. I mean, it's the difference between making wine with human feet in the 1700s and actually using stainless steel, fermenting under refrigeration, picking earlier in the day, better pruning, all of that, that leap in wine that started with the autoclave, the silo for making wine. That's where olive oil is. And unfortunately,

and it breaks my heart to say it, most people in the Salento have not made that leap, at least mentally.

**Jeremy:** Well, one of the objections in the early days of the epidemic of Xylella, one of the objections was, oh, it's a government plot to displace us from our land and replant with industrial olives. Did that have any foundation?

**Silvestro:** To my knowledge, no. I mean, it was really what the Covid conspiracy theorists practiced on before Covid came along. Right? So you still see Xylella mafia, Xylella Dittatore — dictator. You still see the level of, uh, of thought. I mean, most graffiti is not particularly well thought out, but in 14 year old minds that are painting it. But no, there was no nothing about it ever seemed that there was a government plot. If that were the case, if there were someone trying to wipe it out to buy cheap land, it would have been coastal, right? Because the hinterland of Salento does not have high prices. It doesn't really make sense, if the government really wanted to take premium land ... This is such a stupid conversation, but if the government really wanted to take premium land, it would have gone to central Puglia, where the quality of olive oil is extraordinary.

**Jeremy:** Was there any other way that it could have been handled to actually stop the spread? To stop it getting a hold?

**Silvestro:** The biggest factor here, the reason that not only did it land here, but the reason it took off here more ... And this was, we only know this after the fact. The reason it took off here better than anywhere else is absentee landlords. So we now, we know. We know now that the spittlebug has its reproductive cycle in the grass around there. So you have essentially a tremendous amount of people that own property here that will radically prune their trees down, hoping not to have to touch them for 25 or 30 years so they can leave them to their granddaughter or whatever else. And in that absentee landlord, we're not manicuring your trees. That's where the spittlebug really was able to was able to reproduce. You just see an olive tree, even a close up of an olive tree, and know what part of Puglia you're in, essentially by the upkeep. And the olive trees of central and northern Puglia look like bonsai trees, like some of the perfect manicured gardens. Right? And without realising it, that's what stopped the ... That's the biggest hurdle for the bug, the vector, the

spittlebug to get past is not actually being able to replicate by the tree.

**Jeremy:** Would it have been different if they'd offered farmers more compensation for grubbing up old trees?

**Silvestro:** I don't think so, because, again, most of the trees were not particularly active. The vast majority of trees here go unpicked. It's not a huge producing region.

**Jeremy:** Let's talk a little bit about the revival. How expensive is it to convert a field of old, probably dead, unmaintained olive trees into a new planting of these more intensive trees? The varieties? And how do farmers manage that?

**Silvestro:** That I don't know. I simply don't know. As a school, we buy a four year old olive tree for every one that comes to the school. Every year it's about 1300 trees, and the trees themselves are fairly inexpensive. I think I pay €4, €6 for a four year old tree. The idea is that you're going to be planting a tree that's already shown that it's a survivor. The expenses of ripping out trees, that I don't know. There was also talk of building a charcoal industry here because you can't export the wood as it is. If you want to make wooden spoons or salad bowls or whatever else. But legally you can't export the wood. So there's also a lot of talk about how do you hold onto that carbon. So if you start burning it, right, that's going up into ... as soon as the tree starts to decompose, it goes up. So what can you do to keep not carbon release when you have 11 and counting 11 million dead trees.

**Jeremy:** So when you've planted a new olive tree, how long does it take to come into production?

**Silvestro:** So the only tree that you can legally plant here right now is called, FS17, or Favolosa. As a school, we're very bullish on Favolosa because no matter what happens, even if agronomists can find better resistant versions — so that historically it was Cellina di Nardò and Ogliarola were the two species from here — 50 50 for the DOP from Terra d'Otranto. So that's really another reason why it was hit so hard here, is that it was not a biodiversity of the two different species. So even if there are resistant versions of those, planting Favolosa now is really important for not losing topsoil and not losing workers.

Once you have a lot of workers moving abroad because they can no longer find a livelihood here, then you're going to have to start importing workers. And that starts to look very much like the Val di Non, where you have all the apple pickers are all coming in from other parts and all kinds of problems that builds, where you don't have a local ... worker health or who pays for their health care and on and on and on.

**Jeremy:** Yeah. Take me through the kind of transition. You've planted new trees, FS17. You've planted them on a grid. You're more mechanised than you ever were before. How does that play out for the farmer? What are their concerns now?

**Silvestro:** Well, so one of the biggest problems in the Salento is agriculture has really left. So you have a ... If you look at the amount of vegetables or barley, huge barley, or hard durum wheat or, you know, just essentially vegetables, most of those are now being imported from other parts of Puglia. So you have essentially an agricultural desert going on here. So I think what you're going to see is a new generation that comes up, that starts going into agriculture. So hipsters or whatever, whatever you want to call that next generation. And they tend to be much more better at marketing. They tend to be understanding value adding. If I do this extra step then I can charge more at the market. So I think it's not that you have a farmer that had 40 trees and then start ... Now it's a complete, it's a different industry going from grandfathered with 40 trees to intensive or semi-intensive. It's hard to imagine two things that are. ... It's singing in the shower or filling concert seats.

**Jeremy:** So it's basically, it's new people who are taking on the industry here and from what I've read that you that you've written, it's a good thing. It's going to be a good thing for the olive oil of Salento.

**Silvestro:** Yeah, that's a really hard pill to swallow for most people here because it's so tied to we ... I mean, a lot of these slogans, you say, we are the people of the olive trees. And again, I'm really close to olive oil because my grandfather makes it versus having a false sense of familiarity with it. And I think knocking all that down, how painful it is. And then starting over with an industry that actually can produce money, it's not just what retired men do. Not just men, but retired

men do to make 70 litres for their families and usually a very dubious quality.

So moving over to intensive or semi intensive, it's not romantic, but it's difficult to imagine how it's not going to put a lot more money coming in, give a lot more jobs. Get 25% unemployment here. So tremendous amount of unemployment and olive trees everywhere. Getting that mentally, making that switch from my grandfather had 40 trees to now I'm going to actually invest in this and build, buy better equipment and actually start being competitive on the global scene. That I think is a mental shift that's going to sting. And it's probably not going to happen in one generation. We're probably talking about the the children or the grandchildren of the people that had 40 trees.

**Jeremy:** I was intrigued to read you're a sommelier of olive oil and that not just the quality of different oils, but you recommend different oils for different purposes and kind of varietals. I mean, you produce varietals essentially from one kind of olive. What are the key messages from that?

**Silvestro:** So if you went back 50 years ago anywhere in the world, most people would say if you were offering someone a glass of wine, they they would have said, do you want white flavoured wine or red flavoured wine? That was the level of sophistication, right? And so olive oil was something you bought with toilet paper and cat food under the same roof as your supermarket, whatever. And olive oil is moving away from that. And it's moving into ... It's not just mono varietal, but that's often a really ... especially in the New World where people don't have glass of Bordeaux, they have a glass of, of Cabernet, right? So they're already used to thinking of genetics versus place or DOP or DOC.

So there are lighter oils that would be the equivalent of a white wine that would go better with fish. If you took a really big coratina and you put it on a piece of flounder or a really light fish, you would not be able to taste the fish whatsoever. The same way that nobody, or very few people, would have a piece of flounder with a glass of Australian Shiraz, right? So if you think about heft, you think about complexity, then ... And we already know more about wine. The average consumer knows more about wine than we do olive oil. So you already have a tremendous amount of information under your belt, right?

So you have ... There's this is a really light oil. This is going to flavour lighter, more delicate things. And if you start thinking about ingredients versus dishes then it even makes more sense, right. You say, well what goes best with a salad. What are the the ingredients in a salad? An iceberg lettuce is going to be very different than radicchio, right. So which oil is going to go better with radicchio, a big gutsy Wagner type oil. What's going to go better with iceberg or microgreens or delicate fish or something that you really grew in the garden and you really want to taste the tomato that you grew? Those are all going to be much more delicate things. But that's exactly the same correlation with how wine works, right? And I think most of us would know that we don't robotically have one wine with all of our foods and understand that.

I see in the next ten years that a lot of the world will have a sideboard in the dining room with 4 or 5 oils; a bottle I bought back from Thessaloniki, this is the bottle that I got from Provence. And we're not just thematic, it's Provençal. I need Provençal oil, but also just again, the same thing. This is a much more delicate dish, a bigger dish. And so I have this oil.

**Jeremy:** When the price of my friends' oils went up, about 5 or 6 years ago, I think it was, I made a decision to buy supermarket oil for cooking and use my friends' oils as a dressing. It's bad enough having kind of one oil for cooking, one oil for dressing. I can't bring myself to think about having 3 or 4 oils. How do you keep them in good condition, for one thing?

**Silvestro:** Well, the enemy is ... The primary enemies are oxygen and heat and light. So we put ours in a metal can so that we remove one of the enemies right away. I think that using supermarket oil for cooking is a really smart move. So you really want to think about your oil into two different camps. You have your vehicle for cooking and you want to be stingy with that. I need to sauté an onion. I'm going to use a bottle of Berio, Bertolli, Carapelli, whatever, any of these sort of supermarket oils, and know that what you're doing is you're avoiding butter, you're avoiding lard, you're avoiding suet, you're avoiding trans fats. So it's not actively, proactively good for you. It's you're avoiding these other things. I always say like matcha tea versus Diet Coke. You drink Diet Coke not because it's good for you but because you want to avoid sugar, right?

But then when when you finish, you turn off the heat in the kitchen and you sit down in the dining room, then you would have oils that would be based on their heft with the size of their flavours, and you would treat those as a condiment. When the grilled vegetables come out of the kitchen when the fire is off, then you add the raw oil. And when you're ... If you need to use oil, which you probably shouldn't for cooking, for grilling a vegetable, you want to be really stingy with it. And does it really matter the quality? So keep in mind that good quality oils are destroyed, both the flavour and the antioxidants, by cooking. So, think of your own truism. Keep your oil in the dining room. Don't apply it until the fire is off. However that helps you to get to get to that.

**Jeremy:** Finally, you teach these courses here, which sound absolutely marvellous. And you said that the future of the olive oil industry down here in the Salento is not going to be as romantic. Is that going to affect why people want to come down here and study with you. I imagine a lot of students are drawn by the very romanticism of the south of Puglia, and I wonder how that ... Do you think that will change?

**Silvestro:** Well, yeah. It's not fun to go in the countryside. Everything looks like a Tim Burton film, right? You got all these twisted dead trees. That's horrible. And when we go to take the students to Otranto on Thursdays, you can see it in their faces fall and everyone falls quiet because it's just looking at literally millions of dead trees.

As the school, we have a class in February, we're replanting those trees and people come and bring their work boots and blue jeans, and we go out and plant. That seems to be bringing people in, especially February, which is not an easy month for to bring international tourists. Most people don't think about Italy until really the spring. So I think when people feel like they can be part of the solution versus part of the problem, first of all realise that there is a problem and then how to actively help it. I see a lot of really positive emotions coming out of that. That's all you can really do, right? You can only ... This is the toolkit we have right now, replanting with this different species. I mean, I think there's going to be ... It's going to be a little bit of a ...

Calluses are going to have to be formed on the human heart on this kind of stuff too, because we're used to seeing grapes lined out like.



Laid out on metal wires. And exactly ... They look exactly the same. If you were flying over a helicopter, you wouldn't be able to tell the difference between modern olives and modern grapes. Yet we romanticise grapes growing that way. So it's going to take some of that. It's going to have to change, and we have to get used to it, used to seeing that, I think that the future, if we can turn this into a cash making industry that's sustainable, I think that, you know, that's all we really have left, right. And ultimately, the region will be better for it.

**Jeremy:** You said calluses are going to have to grow on on the heart. Xylella, for all the pessimism — and I was one of the pessimists, I have to say. You know, I did episodes saying this is the end of the olive and what happens when it gets to Umbria and Tuscany? But if — and it could still be if it gets there, I mean, let's not even think about that. But could it have been a blessing in disguise for the Salento.

**Silvestro:** Yeah, I believe ultimately it would be. Also, keep in mind that Tuscany produces very little oil comparatively. I mean, Italy's Puglia is between 45 and 55 per cent of the national harvest every year. I believe Tuscany last year was 4 per cent. So there are a lot of award-winning oils from central Italy. I'm not badmouthing those oils for a second. They're very impressive. But they're not ... Those are not where the lion's share of it is made. So, Puglia I think, or Puglia for oil. Again, if the rest of Puglia upped its game and is more protective, — obviously the containment is important.

But also one of the problems in provincial Europe is that there's a sense of identity based on the local culture, based on the local province. Right? And they're constantly ... Everyone's picking up new things and not realising that they have to give up some old things. Right? Because you can only carry so many different things. If you embrace sushi, you're probably no longer making pasta in the home and that sort of thing.

And I think that at the heart of Xylella and the Salento is an identity crisis, that we're all the children of farmers, we're all farmers ourselves. And for most people, that's not the case any longer. And there's not a lot of industry left here as far as farming. So I think first we have to look at ourselves in the mirror and say, what are we? Who are we really today? And if we want to be farmers? Farming is a very different industry than it used to be. It's no longer sustenance farming. It's now actually value adding in a competitive global marketplace. And

I think once, once we as a region can get our minds around that, everything's going to be much easier.

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